Poor Gamer's Almanac

Vol. II - Issue 3
March 2005

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This month's cover art is done by Joshua Raynack. If you want to display your artwork as a cover or for future "Art Gallery" articles, please write to Joshua Raynack at jraynack@aleapublishing.com

We also like to thank The Le Games and RPGNow.com, for their contributions for this month's issue of *Poor Gamer's Almanac.*

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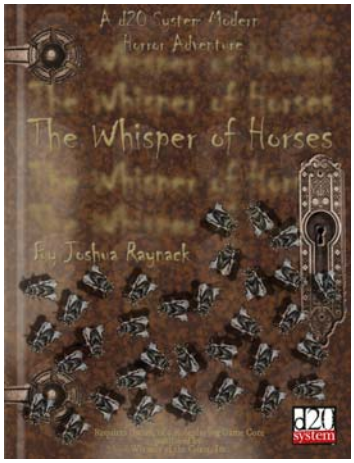

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Poor Gamer's Almanac

Thoughts From the Publisher

Well, another two months has passed and here we are proudly presenting our third issue. We like to thank all of you who have downloaded our previous issues and made this poor gamer's e-zine a success.

Some may have heard that a new era is about to take place at RPGNow.com. Those of you who are familiar with the e-book distributor know that the service is good and consistent. Well, they are working out a solution to make more of your favorite e-books into print books. We at Alea Publishing Group are planning to release some of our upcoming products as print products as soon as possible—which brings us to ask this question: would you like to see the *Poor Gamer's Almanac* in print?

We have toyed around with the question ever since we heard about RPGNow.com's plans. The most important factor for us is we would like to keep the cost as low as possible (otherwise it might as well be called the *Rich Gamer's Almanac*). However, the upside is that the money generated would go to paying people like yourself when you wanted to submit an article or artwork.

Just let us know by writing either cguill@aleapublishing.com or jraynack@aleapublishing.com.

O.k., now for something completely different—ratings. We would like to know whether we're doing something good here or if there are things that need some fixin'. Please leave a comment at RPGNow.com (good or bad) so we know what our audience wants or needs at their game table. Also, if there is something particular you don't like—please be specific. Thanks, and see you next time!

- Alea Publishing Group Staff

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This means you! Let this section grow into a Letters to the Editor section. Do you like what you see? Do you hate what you see? What would you like to grace these pages?

So write our Editor and Public Relations guy Cameron Guill at:

cguill@aleapublishing.com

Letters to the Editor

The class skills for the Knight Hospitaller are not listed in the book. Do you have a listing for them available (or are they there and I'm just missing them)?

Otherwise, both of the knight guidebooks are *very* well done and I'm enjoying them. Keep up the good work!

Cheers,
James

Hey James,

First off, thanks for the compliment and we are glad that you are enjoying our products. Secondly, you are absolutely right - there are no class skills for the Knight Hospitaller. For as long as it has been out, I am surprised it has been overlooked (especially since we use it at our game table) - if it was a snake . . .

Anyway, after digging through our archives, I found this in the first drafts:

Class Skills
The Knight Hospitaller's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Climb (Str), Concentration (Con), Craft (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Heal (Wis), Intuit Direction (Wis), Jump (Str), Knowledge (arcana) (Int), Knowledge (religion) (Int), Profession (Wis), and Spellcraft (Int).

Skill Points at Each Level: 2 + Int modifier.

Hope this works for you. As for the *Question of Honor: A Guidebook to Knights*, it is good that we are about to start working on a new edition. Don't worry, it won't change too much - in fact were adding a bunch of new stuff and it will be one of our first print products.

ART GALLERY

This month we are displaying artwork from an upcoming Alea Publishing Group product: *Mindcraft*. The book features a new alternative rules system on how to implement psionics in your campaign. This new system, devised by Doug Meerschaert, offers more freedom for players wishing to run psionic characters. So if you have yet to put psionics in your game or you are looking for something new, *Mindcraft* might be for you.

Above—The Mindwalker

Above Right—The Mental Warrior

Right—The Mental Inquisitor

Product Preview

If you are familiar with any of our products, you might get the crazy suspicion that we are crazy about knights. Until recently, they played just a minor role in the d20 System. So when this product came out, we were eager to sink our teeth into it. The following preview this month is the Troubad'war class from *Unorthodox Knights* brought to you by The Le Games.

Lanternian Knights

By Sean Holland

"Our crimes will not be forgiven, we must earn redemption."

Sometimes a person falls from grace and when they do, the Knights of the Lantern are there to help them back up. The Lanternian Knights seek redemption through guiding others back from darkness and battling the darkness directly.

More experienced Lanternian Knights often seek tasks that take them into lands ruled by tyrants and harsh overlords to rescue slaves and captives. Some consider that the greatest task a Lanternian Knight can do, other believe that spiritual rescue is more important than the physical. Most kingdoms welcome the Lanternian Knights, in small numbers.

Adventures: Lanternian Knights do not adventure for material wealth but for spiritual gain. That being said, they find spiritual gain in many things, such as liberating wealth from evil so it can be used to help the downtrodden, or turning back the armies of a tyrant. Any adventure that furthers the cause of redemption will be considered, and possibly attempted, by a Lanternian Knight.

Characteristics: Lanternian Knights are usually thoughtful and devout, more prone to prove their worth through deed rather than word. They are skilled in arms and in other skills, as their tasks often require a wide breadth of knowledge.

Alignment: The Lanternian Knights are those that seek redemption for its own sake. Such seekers are not motivated by greed but by their souls. These knights are often forced to act outside of the law and will not let evil hide behind legalism.

Religion: The Lanternian Knights as often as not follow redemption or good as pure concepts, without choosing a single patron among the higher powers. Others chose to emulate a particular deity's path to truth and redemption.

Background: Lanternian Knights come from all backgrounds and all places, anyone can seek redemption.

Races: All are welcome in the Lanternian Knights as all are welcome to seek redemption.

Other Classes: Lanternian Knights admire paladins and clerics and their faith, druids and rangers for the same reason but they are not as comfortable around them. Most others they are willing to work with though the wild nature of barbarians often makes them uncomfortable.

GAME RULE INFORMATION

Lanternian Knights have the following game statistics.

Abilities: Strength and Constitution are the defining characteristics for a Lanternian Knight, but Dexterity and Wisdom can also prove useful.

Alignment: A Lanternian Knight must be good and may not be lawful.

Hit Die: d10

Class Skills

The Lanternian Knight's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Climb (Str), Craft (any) (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Handle Animal (Cha), Heal (Wis), Intimidate (Cha), Jump (Str), Knowledge (local, nature, religion) (Int), Profession (any) (Wis), Ride (Dex), Sense Motive (Wis), Survival (Wis) and Swim (Str).

Skill Points at 1st Level: (2 + Int modifier) x 4.

Skill Points at Each Additional Level : 2+ Int modifier.

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the Lanternian Knight.

Armor and Weapon Proficiency: Lanternian Knights are proficient in the use of all simple weapons, all martial weapons, and with light and medium armor and shields (except tower shields).

Lantern's Light (Su): A Lanternian Knight knows it is better to produce a single spark of light than to curse the darkness. With a single touch, the Knight may cause any object to glow like a torch, shedding bright light in a 20-foot radius (and dim light for an additional 20 feet). Light taken into an area of magical darkness does not function. The

Knight may do this a number of times a day equal to half his level, rounded up.

Lantern's Light and its effects lasts for a number of minutes equal to half his Knight level (rounded up) times 10. The Knight may only have one *Lantern's Light* active at any given time.

Oath of Duty (Ex): The Lanternian Knight is devoted to his task and will overcome any obstacle to complete it. At 2nd level, the knight may take an oath to complete a task to further his own redemption (subject to DM's approval), while the knight is acting to fulfill this oath, he gains a +1 bonus to all skill checks and Saves.

Focused Sword (Ex): The Lanternian Knight learn to focus both his mind and his weapon to do his utmost for redemption. At 3rd level, he gains the *weapon focus* feat as a bonus feat.

Conceal Purpose (Su): At times the Lanternian Knight does not wish their allegiances to be known. At 4th level, the Knight gains Bluff and Disguise as class skills and they are protected from effects that detect alignment as if protected by a *nondetection* spell. The knight may dismiss or reestablish the *nondetection* effect at will as a free action.

Nondetection: The Knight becomes difficult to detect by divination spells such as clairaudience/clairvoyance, locate object, and detect spells. Nondetection also prevents location by such magic items as crystal balls. If a divination is attempted against the warded creature, the caster of the divination must succeed on a caster level check (1d20 + caster level) against a DC of 11 + the Knights level.

Persevere (Ex): The Lanternian Knight does not falter once he has set his mind on a task. At 5th level, he gains *endurance* as a bonus feat.

Endurance: You gain a +4 bonus on the following checks and saves: Swim checks made to resist nonlethal damage, Constitution checks made to continue running, Constitution checks made to avoid nonlethal damage from a forced march, Constitution checks made to hold your breath, Constitution checks made to avoid nonlethal damage from starvation or thirst, Fortitude saves made to avoid nonlethal damage from hot or cold environments, and Fortitude saves made to resist damage from suffocation. Also, you may sleep in light or medium armor without becoming fatigued.

Heaven's Strike (Su): The knight's weapon represents his soul and can be a bane to creatures of darkness. Once a day beginning 5th level, as a free action, the knight may bless his weapon with *Heaven's Strike*. A weapon blessed this way gains a +1 enhancement bonus when used against evil creatures. The blessed weapon will also bypass any damage reduction of evil creatures. A ranged weapon enchanted this way will imbue these abilities to the ammunition it fires. This effect lasts for a number of rounds equal to half the Knight's level (rounded up).

Reserve of Strength (Su): The Lanternian Knight can draw upon the strength of his convictions to do what must be done. At 6th level, once a day, as a free action, the Knight can gain (or heal) a number of points equal to 1d8 + his Wisdom Bonus (if any). These temporary hit points last for an hour. At 12th and 18th levels, the Knight may do this one additional time per day. He may only use this ability once per round.

Lantern's Might: The Lanternian Knight can focus his light to help all of his allies in need. Beginning 7th level, the Knight any ally within 20-feet of a Lanternian Knight's *Lantern Light* gains a +1 bonus to all attack rolls.

Aura of Strength (Su): The Lanternian Knight can give support to a single ally with a well timed word. At 8th level, as a free action the Knight may enchant any ally within 20' feet of him with an *Aura of Strength*. The enchanted ally gains a +2 bonus to his AC and a +1 bonus to his melee attack rolls and

Table M-1: The Lanternian Knight — Core Class

Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1st	+1	+2	+0	+2	Lantern's Light
2nd	+2	+3	+0	+3	Oath of Duty
3rd	+3	+3	+1	+3	Focused Sword
4th	+4	+4	+1	+4	Conceal Purpose
5th	+5	+4	+1	+4	Endurance, Heaven's Strike
6th	+6/+1	+5	+2	+5	Reserve of Strength (1/day)
7th	+7/+2	+5	+2	+5	Lantern's Might
8th	+8/+3	+6	+2	+6	Gift of Strength
9th	+9/+4	+6	+3	+6	Oath of Loyalty, Overcome
10th	+10/+5	+7	+3	+7	Lantern's Beacon, Lantern's Miracle (1st level)
11th	+11/+6/+1	+7	+3	+7	Fast Recovery
12th	+12/+7/+2	+8	+4	+8	Reserve of Strength (2/day)
13th	+13/+8/+3	+8	+4	+8	Shield of Faith, Lantern's Miracle (2nd level)
14th	+14/+9/+4	+9	+4	+9	Lantern's Courage
15th	+15/+10/+5	+9	+5	+9	Dutiful Strike (1/day)
16th	+16/+11/+6/+1	+10	+5	+10	Oath of Heavens, Lantern's Miracle (3rd level)
17th	+17/+12/+7/+2	+10	+5	+10	Armored Soul
18th	+18/+13/+8/+3	+11	+6	+11	Reserve of Strength (3/day)
19th	+19/+14/+9/+4	+11	+6	+11	Lantern's Miracle (4th level)
20th	+20/+15/+10/+5	+12	+6	+12	Living Lantern

damage. This drains the knight however, as he will cursed with a –2 to his own AC as long as the *Aura* is in effect. The *Aura* lasts for 10 rounds or until the Knight chooses to end its effect. The Knight may use this ability on up to 2 different allies at a time. The –2 penalty is cumulative.

Oath of Loyalty (Ex): The Lanternian Knight's devotion leads him to greater effort in furthering his redemption. At 9th level, the bonus from his oath increase to +2 to his bonuses when using his *Oath*.

Overcome (Ex): The Lanternian Knight will not let anything deter him from his task -- physical hardships mean nothing to the knight. At 9th level, the knight gains a +3 bonus to resist disease, pain and torture and a +1 bonus against poisons.

Lantern's Beacon (Ex): The ability of the Lanterian Knight to call upon his inner light may now manifest in a brilliant light that may inspire others. At 10th level, the Knight and any ally within 20-feet of the Knight's *Lantern Light* will gain a +1 to all saves.

Lantern's Miracle (Su): The Lanterian Knight may channel and shape his faith to do marvelous things. At 10th level, once per day the Lanternian Knight may duplicate the effect of any clerical spell of 1st level as long as it does not have the evil descriptor. Doing this generates an attack of opportunity and has a caster level equal to the Knight's level – 3. At 13th level, the Knight may duplicate a 2nd level spell or lower. At 16th level, the Knight may duplicate a 3rd level spell or lower. At 19th level the Knight may duplicate a 4th level spell or lower.

Fast Recovery (Ex): The Lanternian Knight's dedication allows him to recuperate at an accelerated rate. Beginning at 11th level, the Knight will be healed a number of hit point equal to his Con bonus (if any) and Wis bonus (if any) after just 4 hours of rest.

Shield of Faith (Sp): The Lanternian Knight's faith becomes manifest. Beginning 13th level, once per day as a free action the Knight can enchant himself or an ally with a +2 deflection bonus to AC for 1 hour.

Lantern's Courage (Ex): The ability of the Lanterian Knight to call upon his inner light to show courage to all his allies. At 14th level, the Knight any ally within 20-feet of the Knight's *Lantern Light* will gain a +4 to all saves versus fear effects.

Dutiful Strike (Su): The Lanternian Knight can channel his belief and duty into a single blow. At 15th level, once per day, a knight may make a dutiful strike with one normal melee attack. He adds his Wisdom bonus (if any) to his attack roll and deals 1 extra point of damage per class level. Furthermore, if he is within 20 feet of an active *Lantern's Light*, his critical threat will be increased by 1 for this *Dutiful Strike*.

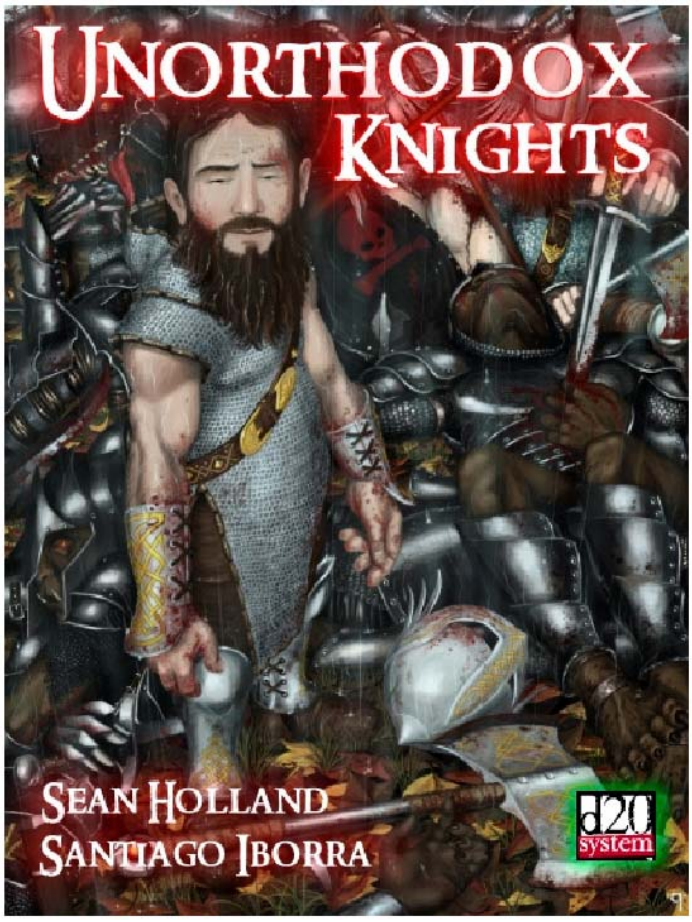
Armored Soul (Su): The Lanterian Knight's soul is guarded by his faith and duty. At 17th level, the knight gains a +4 sacred bonus to resist death effects, level drains, necromantic spells and undead abilities.

Oath of Heavens (Ex): The Lanternian Knight's devotion allow him to overcome almost any obstacle in his quest for redemption. At 16th level, the skill bonus from his oath increase to +4, he gains a +2 bonus to saves while striving to achieve his oath and a +1 bonus to attack those that would bar his path to redemption.

Living Lantern (Su): At 20th level, the Lanternian Knight has achieved his goal of spiritual redemption and now stands among those who can lead others to the light. Once per day he may sacrifice a number of hit points equal to half of his maximum to become a living Lantern, shining brilliantly and illuminating up to a 40-foot radius. The knight and all his allies within this light gain the bonuses of *Lantern's Light*, and all their attacks will bypass any damage reduction of evil creatures. Furthermore, all evil creatures within the radius are penalized –2 to AC and must make an immediate Will save (DC 20 + Knight's Cha bonus) or become *blinded* for 1d6 rounds. An evil creature only needs to make this save once to be avoid being blinded. *True Beacon* lasts for 1d10+10 rounds, or until the Knight wills it to end.

Blinded: The character cannot see. He takes a –2 penalty to Armor Class, loses his Dexterity bonus to AC (if any), moves at half speed, and takes a –4 penalty on Search checks and on most Strength- and Dexterity-based skill checks. All checks and activities that rely on vision (such as reading and Spot checks) automatically fail. All opponents are considered to have total concealment (50% miss chance) to the blinded character.

Ex-Lanternian Knights: Ex-Lanternian Knights are rare, most die before they have a chance to reconsider their path. Some go on to become clerics. A Lanternian Knight who becomes evil loses all of his supernatural abilities until such a time that he can return to a good alignment and *atone*.



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The Origin of the Gnoll

By Joshua Raynack

The sadistic, vicious, hyena-like humanoid, has had credence as a underhanded and savage opponent for lower level characters. However, in a world populated with a vast number of monstrosities, gnolls, like most, fall into obscurity with the question of their origin. Why do they exist? How did they come to be? Were they always the savage creatures that lurk in ruins? Where do they fit in my campaign world? These are all questions that a Game Master might ask when deciding to populate his or her world or throw an unexpected encounter at players.

The origin of the gnoll presented here is in relation to the Hill Lands region and the world of Terra featured in *A Question of Honor: A Guidebook to Knights*. However, that does not restrict you as a Game Master from altering this article to fit your own campaign needs.

The Egyus Empire

The Egyus Empire reached its height during the First Kingdom of Man extending far over the world of Terra, centered in the area now known as the Malsara Desert. The first great structures of man rose during this period as great god-kings ruled the populace.

The Egyus pantheon not only included these god-kings, but a dizzying number of religious faiths—some ancients texts found place the number up to 740 deities. To even confuse the matter further, many of these deities had more than one aspect and later some of them began to incorporate aspects of several other deities.

Needless to say, gods and goddesses played an important role in the everyday life of the Egyus people; for better or for worse. According to ancient Egyus myths, it is during the earliest period of the Egyus Empire that the first gnolls appeared.

The Slayers of Men

According to an early Egyus myth, the god Ra lived among men and was revered due to his exalted position. However, as he began to grow old, men began to view him as mortal and ceased to listen to his wisdom.

Furious with the blasphemy that rang in his ears, he met in secret with several of the other gods in order to create a scourge upon men. Thoth, the scribe of the gods and recorder of souls, divided his faithful companion, Cynocephalus (half-ape, half-hyena), into two. With the help of the other gods, Thoth gave the hyena portion a humanoid form and sent it against those that opposed Ra.

Not only did this Cynocephali destroy the blasphemers, it also devoured their bodies and souls leaving them to linger in a non-existence. Afterward, Thoth let the creature multiply instead of reuniting Cynocephali with its ape-half. As they grew in number, these gnolls served as a reminder to all Egyus that the gods were watching.

Taskmasters

After Cynocephali's reign of terror ended and his offspring grew to populate the early Egyus empire, pharaohs filled their personal guard with these creatures. The gnolls were effective in keeping fear and order of those under reigning god-kings.

As time grew, they became elite units of soldiers to do to other nations what they originally did to the Egyus people: cause fear. Those emerging kingdoms that did not submit to conquering Egyus armies were defeated and their champions consumed. The subdued nations were used to fill the ranks of the slave class. When the Egyus Empire finally consolidated into a reigning power over the civilized lands of Terra, gnolls put their savagery to work as taskmasters.

The Fall

However, all thing pass. It was so for the Egyus Empire as Grece became an emerging threat and later the Romus Empire. As structure and order began to crumble, the chaotic nature of the gnolls became apparent as the reigning pharaohs began to lose control.

With the last remnants of the Egyus dissipating beneath the sands of the Malsara, remaining gnolls formed into packs and then into tribes. The strongest of these tribes remained until the Malsara could no longer support life while the weakest brought terror to the merchants of the two young nations of Romus and Grece.

Gnoll Paragon

Though the gnoll's legacy of tyranny through the snap of a taskmaster's whip faded with the Egyus Empire, small tribes or even strong individuals can prove threatening. They are brutes with no interest in civilized ways as even the concept of tribal culture mystifies them. They are terrifying allies as many orc leaders can attest to—many keep one eye open while sleeping—and are trustworthy only when they believe their ally is strong and capable. Weakness drives gnolls into a frenzy.

Adventures: Filled with constant hunger and no ambition except just to live through the day, gnolls follow the scent for fresh slaves. Only raiding merchants when they have superior numbers, gnolls tend to hunt ruins for stragglers or combing through the dead of a battlefield for any survivors.

For this purpose, they are excellent bounty hunters, tracking escape slaves for powerful noble lords or Turcoman and orc leaders. They also easily feel the ranks as mercinaries of nefarious minor nobles seeking to put fear in their peasant populace. Needless to say, gnolls always enjoy snapping the whip across a slave's back—at least until mealtime.

Characteristics: Gnolls are deviously wild creatures and are quite unsettling when their yipping erupts into a sick laughter. Despite their lower than average intelligence, gnolls are constantly scheming toward their own selfish goals. However, most of these goals simply result in their own preservation. When they see another creature eat, they feel compelled to eat as well or when someone gains power, they too feel that it is time to rise to the occasion.

Paragon Classes

Racial paragons are, as their name suggests, nearly ideal examples of the strengths and abilities of the character's race. Unlike members of other classes, however, racial paragons are more than merely powerful individuals. They are strong in all the ways that their race is strong, while still vulnerable in the ways that their race is vulnerable. Beyond that, they possess powers or capabilities that supersede those of normal members of their race.

Obviously, a character can only take levels in the paragon class associated with his race. A human cannot take levels in dwarf paragon, for example.

Like the sorcerer, druid, and the other standard character classes, the paragon classes presented here have no prerequisites. Paragon class levels can be taken any time a character gains a new level, even at 1st level. A character can multiclass freely between standard character classes, prestige classes for which he or she qualifies.

It's possible for a powerful magic effect such as *shapechange*, *reincarnate*, or *wish* to change a character's race. If a character has already taken racial paragon levels in his original race, he can never become a paragon of another race. However, such effects cause no loss of a paragon's class abilities.

Furthermore, levels in paragon classes never result in XP penalties for multiclass characters.

Alignment: Most gnoll paragons are chaotic evil. They are unpredictable and embody the race's tendency in delightedly causing pain in other sentient creatures.

Religion: Despite their chaotic nature, gnolls find comfort in following the regular phases of the moon. Many scholars attribute this to Thoth, since he was originally the Egyus god of the moon before he became the great scribe. Though the reverence gnolls have for the moon does not directly translate their reverence for some long forgotten Egyus god, some gnoll leaders recognize the name Cynocephalus and its "offspring" Cynocephali.

While many remaining Grece attribute the origin of the gnolls to the trickery of Hermes (the Grece incorrectly attributed gnolls to the Egyus god Anubis in which was later incorporated into an aspect of Hermes), they are far from the truth. However, some gnolls—albiet rare—were recorded worshipping Hermes at the height of the Grece Empire.

Needless to say, those that take time to worship usually worship a god or goddess of slaughter. However, most tribal deities often revolve around various patron demons.

Background: Gnolls that make it to adulthood made the achievement through trickery, cunning, and violence. They exploited all the weaknesses they were exposed to and manipulated those too strong to bully. Although the favored class is ranger, many gnolls multi-class as rogues and barbarians.

Races: Gnolls actually enjoy adventuring with a many different races—it gives them a variety to pick from when their stomachs growl and when alliances grow sour. They never truly feel comfortable with any other creatures, especially other gnolls. Many races view them as paranoid and occasionally nervous unless they believe they are the strongest of the group.

Other Classes: Gnoll paragons respect fighters, rogues, and barbarians, as long as they can immediately benefit from their alliance. They are always eager to learn new survival techniques, ways of acquiring power, and capable fighting styles (some scholars see this as a perversion of Thoth's portfolio of knowledge). Although gnolls respect the mystifying concept of magic, mages are not usually welcomed into their fold unless they can be bullied or manipulated.

GAME RULE INFORMATION

Gnoll paragons have the following game statistics.

Abilities: Strength is most important to gnoll paragons because it helps them acquire the perception of power. It allows them to deliver lethal blows and to bully weaker creatures. Constitution also enable gnolls to endure long hardships and allows them to easily adapt to any environment.

Alignment: Any, although most favor chaotic evil.

Hit Die: d10.

Class Skills

The gnoll paragon's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Hide (Dex), Intimidate (Cha), Knowledge (nature) (Int), Listen (Wis), Spot (Wis), Survival (Wis).

Skill Points at 1st level: (2 + Int modifier) x 4.

Skill Points at Each Additional Level: 2 + Int modifier.

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the gnoll paragon class.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency: Gnoll paragons are proficient with the whip, all simple and martial weapons, and with light and medium armor.

Table M-2: The Gnoll Paragon

Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special	Spells per Day
1st	+1	+2	+0	+0	Improved darkvision (+30 ft.), intimidating stance	—
2nd	+2	+3	+0	+0	Scent	+1 level of ranger
3rd	+3	+3	+1	+1	Ability boost (Str +2)	+1 level of ranger

Spells per Day: Beginning at 2nd level, a gnoll paragon gains new spells per day as if he had also gained a level in ranger. The paragon does not, however, gain any other benefit a character of that class would have gained. This essentially means that the character adds the level of gnoll paragon to his level in ranger, then determines spells per day and caster level accordingly. If the gnoll paragon has no levels in ranger, this class feature has no effect.

Improved Darkvision (Ex): At 1st level, an gnoll paragon's darkvision range increases by 30 feet.

Intimidating Stance (Ex): Because of their ferocious nature, gnolls count as large creatures when using the Intimidate skill.

Scent (Ex): At 2nd level, a gnoll paragon gains the scent ability.

Ability Boost (Ex): At 3rd level, a gnoll paragon's Strength score increases by 2 points.

Encounters of the Malsara: Part III

By Joshua Raynack

The Malsara Desert once held the glorious kingdoms of the Egyus Empire. However, now known as the Waste, the heartland of this region is completely devoid of life. Although, the borders still harbor enough life to sustain the various Turcamen tribes, everyday a few more plants are swallowed by the slowly expanding desert sands.

The following encounter can add an in-depth feel to the Malsara Region located in the Hill Lands, featured in *A Question of Honor: A Guidebook to Knights*, or in any desert region. This is the first part of a four part series covering the encounters that a party can come across in the Malsara Desert.

STARTING POINT

You, as Game Master, need the core rules books, published by Wizards of the Coast, Inc. or the SRD found at RPGNow.com. Furthermore, knowledge of the Hill Lands area featured in *A Question of Honor: A Guidebook to Knights* is useful. Although this adventure uses the 3.5 format of the d20 game system, it may be easily converted into the 3.0 format. This encounter can fit into any existing campaign without difficulty. Feel free to add to or adjust the material within to fit your needs. First, read through the encounter and carefully study the maps (if any) so that you are familiar with them. This will help you run each encounter smoothly. Also, familiarize yourself with each of the encounters in order to utilize them effectively. Secondly, print out the product, or just run it from your computer. Material italicized contains information that can be read or paraphrased to your players while all other information is only meant for you.

THE RESTLESS MERCHANTS OF ARGOS (EL 9)

This encounter is straightforward save that it will surprise those that are not cautious. Surprise coupled with the deadly Constitution drain of wraiths can prove to become a dangerous encounter.

ENCOUNTER SYNOPSIS

The PCs encounter a group of supply wagons surrounded by the dead merchants and soldiers that escorted the doomed caravan. However, the PCs may be tempted to loot the rich wagons and as they do four wraiths emerge from the bodies attacking the players.

ENCOUNTER BACKGROUND

Two brother-merchants of House Mediac, Albus and Franklin Dor, along with three guards, diverted from the supply path into Malsara. Richard Long, one of the guards spotted orc movement across their intended path. Albus, on petition from his brother, decided to move into the outskirts of the desert instead to avoid paying a toll, forced trade, or worse.

However, two days in the plains surrounding the Malsara. along with a slight sandstorm from the east, the merchants became lost and disoriented. Instead of avoiding danger, they walked deeper into it.

A dread wraith, Sir Cathan, a former Hashim Knight who died of heat exhaustion on route to the besieged city of Xorn, has plagued the area and writhes in torment at the slightest notion of life within his grasp. The creature quickly slew the merchants just as the PCs venture upon the wagons.

GETTING STARTED

Read or paraphrase the following:

Albus stood on the high hill and focused on the point to which Captain Long remarked. Even from this distance, the orcish banners were clear.

"I do not like this one bit, Albus," remarked his brother Franklin.

"If it isn't the Malsara, it will be either the Turcaman or this tribe that will trouble our travels. We cannot go back. I rather take my chances with something that is more predictable then humankind and its kin. Besides, Captain Long has traveled the ancient roads along Malsara's edge before."

"Once before," the Captain interjected, "however, I believe the odds are better then what lies up ahead."

"See Franklin, no worries."

"Well, as long as it is the edge of the Malsara we roam," Captain Long corrected, "then we will see."

As in the previous encounter, The Hags of Wentworth (featured in the January issue), this montage is meant to give players a background and reason for the encounter.

Description: *From atop a sand dune, you spy two enclosed wagons, heavily laden for the wheels sink into the ever-shifting sand. Five bodies lay lifeless among scattered torches, their faces frozen in terror. Three appear to be weathered soldiers while the other two seem to be wealthy merchants.*

Light: Night. The feint torches illuminate about 5 feet, while a campfire illuminates a 40 foot diameter.

Sight: Spot check (DC d20+27): *Shifting shadows near the foremost wagon has put you on edge. However, it may be the dancing flames of the torches and campfire.*

Sound: Listen check (DC d20+3): *From the foremost wagon, you hear from within laughter followed by: "Water! Water! Oh, my parched throat."*

Inhabitants: Sir Cathan still inhabits the foremost wagon and though the dread wraith detects the life presence of the intruders, it is too preoccupied with its discovery of water. Sir Cathan will not bother the players nor help its "offspring" in this encounter, however should the players insist at breaking into the foremost wagon, Sir Cathan will attack with utmost ferocity.

Encounter Distance: The PCs spot the wagon at 30 feet.

Combat Tactics: The wraiths that inhabit the soldiers and Franklin Dor (Albus died of a heart attack and not by the cold touch of the dread wraith) will manifest from their respective bodies in 4 rounds. As players are looting the bodies or investigating the area, have them make a spot check (DC d20+11). Those that fail are surprised.

Hints: Those PCs that take notice of the house banners can discern that the wagons belong to House Mediac of Argos with a successful Knowledge (nobility and royalty) check (DC 15). Those that are successful may make a Knowledge (local) check (DC 20) that House Mediac gives a reward for returned house banners and the location of any of their doomed caravans.

In addition, the four packhorses that are hitched to the wagons have worked themselves into a dither. They each died in terror as they attempted to free themselves for the unnatural aura caused by the dread wraith, Sir Cathan.

Wraith (4): CR 5; Medium Undead (incorporeal); HD 5d12; HP 26, 38, 31, 33; Init +7; Spd Fly 60 ft. (good); AC 15 (+3 Dex, +2 deflection), touch 15, flat-footed 12; Base Atk +2; Grp -; Atk +5 melee touch (1d4 plus 1d6 Constitution drain, incorporeal touch); Space/Reach 5ft./5ft.; SA Constitution drain, create spawn; SQ Darkvision 60 ft., daylight powerlessness, incorporeal traits, +2 turn resistance, undead traits, unnatural aura; AL LE; SV Fort +1, Ref +4, Will +6; Str -, Dex 16, Con -, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 15.

Skills and Feats: Diplomacy +6, Hide +11, Intimidate +10, Listen +12, Search +10, Sense Motive +8, Spot +12, Survival +2 (+4 following tracks); Alertness[B], Blind-Fight, Combat Reflexes, Improved Initiative[B]

Constitution Drain (Su): Living creatures hit by a wraith's incorporeal touch attack must succeed on a DC 14 Fortitude save or take 1d6 points of Constitution drain. The save DC is Charisma-based. On each such successful attack, the wraith gains 5 temporary hit points.

Create Spawn (Su): Any humanoid slain by a wraith becomes a wraith in 1d4 rounds. Its body remains intact and inanimate, but its spirit is torn free from its corpse and transformed. Spawn are under the command of the wraith that created them and remain enslaved until its death. They do not possess any of the abilities they had in life.

Unnatural Aura (Su): Animals, whether wild or domesticated, can sense the unnatural presence of a wraith at a distance of 30 feet. They will not willingly approach nearer than that and panic if forced to do so; they remain panicked as long as they are within that range.

Daylight Powerlessness (Ex): Wraiths are utterly powerless in natural sunlight (not merely a *daylight* spell) and flee from it.

Sir Cathan; Dread Wraith: CR 11; Large Undead (incorporeal); HD 16d12; HP 87; Init +13; Spd Fly 60 ft. (good); AC 25 (-1 size, +9 Dex, +7 deflection), touch 25, flat-footed 16; Base Atk +8; Grp -; Atk +16 melee touch (2d6 plus 1d8 Constitution drain, incorporeal touch); Space/Reach 10ft./10ft.; SA Constitution drain, create spawn; SQ Darkvision 60 ft., daylight powerlessness, incorporeal traits, lifesense 60 ft., undead traits, unnatural aura; AL LE; SV Fort +5, Ref +14, Will +14; Str -, Dex 28, Con -, Int 17, Wis 18, Cha 24.

Skills and Feats: Diplomacy +9, Hide +24, Intimidate +26, Knowledge (religion) +22, Listen +25, Search +22, Sense Motive +23, Spot +25, Survival +4 (+6 following tracks); Alertness[B], Blind-Fight, Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Improved Initiative[B], Improved

Natural Attack (incorporeal touch), Mobility, Spring Attack.

Lifesense (Su): A dread wraith notices and locates living creatures within 60 feet, just as if it possessed the blindsight ability. It also senses the strength of their life force automatically, as if it had cast *deathwatch*.

Constitution Drain (Su): Living creatures hit by a dread wraith's incorporeal touch attack must succeed on a DC 25 Fortitude save or take 1d8 points of Constitution drain. The save DC is Charisma-based. On each such successful attack, the dread wraith gains 5 temporary hit points.

Create Spawn (Su): Any humanoid slain by a dread wraith becomes a wraith in 1d4 rounds. Its body remains intact and inanimate, but its spirit is torn free from its corpse and transformed. Spawn are under the command of the wraith that created them and remain enslaved until its death. They do not possess any of the abilities they had in life.

Unnatural Aura (Su): Animals, whether wild or domesticated, can sense the unnatural presence of a wraith at a distance of 30 feet. They will not willingly approach nearer than that and panic if forced to do so; they remain panicked as long as they are within that range.

Daylight Powerlessness (Ex): Wraiths are utterly powerless in natural sunlight (not merely a *daylight* spell) and flee from it.

COMBAT TACTICS OF SIR CATHAN

Sir Cathan has no intention of fighting the PCs. Although the dread wraith despises life, the find of his precious water holds him at bay. However, should the characters provoke, he will attack with all the ferocity he can muster. The following are round by round tactics that may be used to decide Sir Cathan's actions.

Round 1: Sir Cathan will partially move out from the enclosed wagon (giving him a +4 cover bonus) and Intimidate (DC d20 + character level or Hit Dice + target's Wisdom bonus [if any] + target's modifiers on saves against fear) the strongest looking character within its reach as a standard action. If successful, the PC is shaken (-2 penalty on attack rolls, ability checks, and saving throws) for 1 round.

Round 2: The dread wraith will move back into the wagon (giving total cover unless attacking; see incorporeal subtype below) attacking the PC it Intimidated if within range. If not, then the closest creature.

Round 3: It continues to attack from within the wagon giving him the most protection. Should the characters move from the wagon's reach, Sir Cathan will emerge, attacking those that prove to be the most threat, such as obvious spellcasters. Should it seem that certain targets are successfully saving from its Constitution drain, Sir Cathan will Intimidate them the round prior to striking them again.

Should the Characters Flee: Sir Cathan, despite his precious discovery of water, will follow and track retreating PCs until satisfied. He will, at that time, return to the wagon containing the water.

Treasure: Although wraiths and dread wraiths carry no treasure, the merchant caravan may contain items of use to the PCs.

2,300 gp, 30,000 cp, *+1 studded leather*, *protection from arrows 10/magic* (potion), *shillelagh* (oil), *lesser restoration* (potion), *Rod of the Viper*, *arcane scroll* (*chill touch*).

ENCOUNTER NOTES

The following are notes that may be useful when running this particular encounter. They have been made here to help ease the burden of looking up specifics during the encounter.

Ability Score Loss (Su): Some attacks reduce the opponent's score in one or more abilities. This loss can be temporary (ability damage) or permanent (ability drain).

Ability Drain: This effect permanently reduces a living opponent's ability score when the creature hits with a melee attack. The creature's descriptive text gives the ability and the amount drained. If an attack that causes ability drain scores a critical hit, it drains twice the indicated amount (if the damage is expressed as a die range, roll two dice). Unless otherwise specified in the creature's description, a draining creature gains 5 temporary hit points (10 on a critical hit) whenever it drains an ability score no matter how many points it drains. Temporary hit points gained in this fashion last for a maximum of 1 hour.

Some ability drain attacks allow a Fortitude save (DC 10 + 1/2 draining creature's racial HD + draining creature's Cha modifier; the exact DC is given in the creature's descriptive text). If no saving throw is mentioned, none is allowed.

Incorporeal Subtype: An incorporeal creature has no physical body. It can be harmed only by other incorporeal creatures, magic weapons or creatures that strike as magic weapons, and spells, spell-like abilities, or supernatural abilities. It is immune to all nonmagical attack forms. Even when hit by spells or

magic weapons, it has a 50% chance to ignore any damage from a corporeal source (except for positive energy, negative energy, force effects such as *magic missile,* or attacks made with *ghost touch* weapons). Although it is not a magical attack, holy water can affect incorporeal undead, but a hit with holy water has a 50% chance of not affecting an incorporeal creature.

An incorporeal creature has no natural armor bonus but has a deflection bonus equal to its Charisma bonus (always at least +1, even if the creature's Charisma score does not normally provide a bonus).

An incorporeal creature can enter or pass through solid objects, but must remain adjacent to the object's exterior, and so cannot pass entirely through an object whose space is larger than its own. It can sense the presence of creatures or objects within a square adjacent to its current location, but enemies have total concealment (50% miss chance) from an incorporeal creature that is inside an object. In order to see farther from the object it is in and attack normally, the incorporeal creature must emerge. An incorporeal creature inside an object has total cover, but when it attacks a creature outside the object it only has cover, so a creature outside with a readied action could strike at it as it attacks. An incorporeal creature cannot pass through a force effect.

An incorporeal creature's attacks pass through (ignore) natural armor, armor, and shields, although deflection bonuses and force effects (such as *mage armor*) work normally against it. Incorporeal creatures pass through and operate in water as easily as they do in air. Incorporeal creatures cannot fall or take falling damage. Incorporeal creatures cannot make trip or grapple attacks, nor can they be tripped or grappled. In fact, they cannot take any physical action that would move or manipulate an opponent or its equipment, nor are they subject to such actions. Incorporeal creatures have no weight and do not set off traps that are triggered by weight.

An incorporeal creature moves silently and cannot be heard with Listen checks if it doesn't wish to be. It has no Strength score, so its Dexterity modifier applies to both its melee attacks and its ranged attacks. Nonvisual senses, such as scent and blindsight, are either ineffective or only partly effective with regard to incorporeal creatures. Incorporeal creatures have an innate sense of direction and can move at full speed even when they cannot see.

The Hunters

By Shawn Folk

I

Baldur smiled as Jonathan laid out the details. In his years in the arena he had been studded out many times in hopes that his seed would produce many a fine warrior. Whether it be a wealthy countesses or members of the church, it didn't matter, as long as they had enough gold to purchase the services of Kol's finest gladiator. Of course, Baldur never saw any of the profits but he enjoyed the act of sealing the deal never the less.

"I know that she doesn't look like much but she's paying twice the normal fee. You know what to do, just don't waste too much time. You have a fight tonight and I would hate to see you killed because you wore yourself out."

Baldur looked over Jonathan's shoulder, half listening to the old man. He studied the women carefully. Jonathan was right; she didn't look like much but Baldur sensed something about the woman, something strange and distant. Her dark eyes seemed to study him hungrily, her powerful build was visible even from afar, and her face was hideously scared as though clawed by some great beast. She wore various animal hides that barely covered her body and a wicked greatsword strapped to her back. Her hair was dark and filled with knots from years of being uncombed. She smiled back at Baldur, her teeth yellow and her canines unusually sharp. Her odor could be smelled even from this distance. Baldur liked her.

His musings were interrupted from a well-placed backhand from Jonathan.

"Are you even listening to me!? Bah...I don't even know why I put up with you sometimes you big oaf! Now, get to work! I haven't all day." He then pushed by the large man mumbling something about if his brain was a big as something else he would be a genius. Baldur watched the man go and his grin grew even wider. Jonathan wasn't a good man, but he was fair. A reputation that made his fighting arena- the Bloody Pit- one of the finest in all of Darcaida. He treated Baldur and the other gladiators well enough, as long as they were making him money. He also treated those he dealt with the same honesty, ensuring fair business dealings.

"Ahem," said the female. "I'm not paying to stand around all day. I believe we have business."

"Aye. I believe we do. Follow me."

Balder lead the way deeper into the fighting arena. Each of the fighters was given their own cell and only those trusted by Jonathan were allowed to roam freely around the pit. Baldur had long ago earned that trust. He took the women back to his cell, its heavy Iron door rusted with age and nearly off of its hinges. Inside was a variety of furs laid about the floor and the walls were covered with trophies from each of Baldur's kills. There were over twenty mounted on the wall, the heads of those fallen to his blade. A greatsword was mounted in the back of the chamber just below a horned helm.

The woman looked over the room and nodded with approval.

"Fitting. I had heard that you were good but the trophy count far exceeds what I was told. I have watched your last three fights and I must say I was impressed. Tell me, do you always rely on your strength to see you through?" She asked, removing the greatsword from her back and placing it against the cell wall.

"It has served me well so far," replied Balder. It was true; he was a massive man standing over seven feet tall and the strength that rivaled some of the strongest of orcs. His strength and sheer bloodlust had seen him through many tough fights.

"You will do nicely." With a smile she slipped from her animal hides revealing her naked body. She was even more massive than Baldur first thought and it was then he realized that she might even be as strong as him. A feral smile crossed her face as she stalked closer, her dark eyes looking deep into his. With a powerful shove that proved Baldur's suspicions of her strength, he found himself lying upon the furs as she straddled him tearing the loincloth from around his waist.

Afterwards, Baldur laid among the furs in amazement. Before now, all the women he had previously were meek and somewhat shy. It was left up to him to take control and do what was needed, a role that he became used to. The woman lying next to him was something different, a woman wanting something. She had taken control and hadn't let up for...*how long?* The sun was growing lower in the sky and Baldur had sworn it was near high sun when they had entered.

She rose from the furs, sweat still glistening upon her body as she walked over and began to dress. Baldur rolled over, mindful of the scratches upon his

back, watching her move with almost an animal-like grace. She seemed to sense his eyes upon her and turned her head to face him.

"You should feel honored, Baldur of Kol. I do not mate with just anyone. Your strength and victories proved you worthy of being a sire."

Baldur looked upon her with puzzlement.

"There is no guarantee that we were successful. Perhaps we should try it several times again, just to be sure," he mused with a grin.

"There is no need," she stated flatly, her hand moving to her stomach. "I can feel it was more than successful."

Baldur paused, unable to form a response to such a statement.

"A boy I think, if I'm not mistaken. You have done well." She smiled.

"What are you?!" he replied in astonishment.

"Nothing to be concerned about, just a mother who seeks to breed. Perhaps we shall meet again, Baldur of Kol."

With that she pulled the last of the animal skins around her hips and reached for her sword. Strapping it to her back, she started for the door.

"Wait!" He called out after her, "Before you go, I would know your name."

She paused at the doorway, straightening her fur cloak around her shoulders, and glanced back at the man.

"Jathira. My name is Jathira."

Baldur watched her exit the cell, walk around the fighting pit, and vanish out the main gate.

"Jathira," he said out loud, "I'll remember that."

II

Jathira howled as the thunder rumbled outside the cave. Trickles of raindrops formed small pools of water in the cavern but, for the most part, the area remained dry. Her time was growing close, she could tell. The young boy inside her was ready to enter the world. *Her boy*, she thought to herself. She was going to at long last be a mother. It was the one thing that Jathira had longed for. It was almost time. Lightening flashed outside followed closely by a rumble of thunder that shook the cave. Her breathing grew rapidly as her body started to change. Her teeth grew longer, her muscles larger, and small patches of black hair formed all over her body. She began to push with all her strength. She felt him move.

The transformation continued, her face growing larger and elongating. The patches of fur grew more prominent covering most of her flesh. She began to grow. Her arms grew larger, her hands formed into wicked claws. Her hips widened and a small nub of a tail formed on her backside. She pushed.

A few moments later the process was complete. Where once the woman Jathira laid now was the home of a black, bear-like creature. Her breaths grew deeper and she continued to push. Lightening flashed and a primal howl erupted from the cave. She pushed.

Jathira sighed as she looked down at the child in her arms, her human arms. After the birth she had reverted back to normal and now looked upon her son. She smiled at the tiny being that now relied on her for protection. She found she liked the idea. The child looked like a normal human child but Jathira knew better. She had started out the same way. He too would be blessed with the gift. She knew this for certain. In time he would also learn to control it, to embrace it as she had. The child wailed

as the storm grew worse outside.

"Shhhh...little one. You are safe now," she said hugging the child closer.

"Jathira will protect you. Bael, son of Baldur."

III

Bael looked upon his mother with dark puzzled eyes. Jathira sighed and started again.

"I know you do not understand my son, but you must listen. Someday it will all make sense."

She was right. Bael did not understand. All he knew was his hand had changed somehow, it grew bigger and his nails had grown larger. It had scared the young boy. He ran to his mother and she did what she could to explain.

"We are shape-shifters, Bael. It is nothing to be afraid of. Long ago we were blessed by the gods, who made us one with an animal spirit. That spirit is still with us today and protects us. Ours is the spirit of the mighty bear, a fierce and proud warrior of the woodlands. It is he who protects his children."

Bael still didn't understand what his mother was talking about. The cave that had once seem so large now grew tighter and tighter as the seasons passed. Bael had grown quickly and much of his father sparked in the ever-growing frame of the young child. Jathira could already tell that he was going to be even stronger than his father, a fact that she was very proud of. Three years had passed and the boy already showed signs of changing. She herself hadn't shown the gift until she was seven. It was unusual for someone so young to change, but she took it as a sign that the Mighty Bear spirit had blessed her. She smiled to herself and started to explain again . . .

IV

Sweat poured from Bael's brow as he brought the heavy axe down upon the log splitting it in two.

"Tell me again mother. What are we?"

She smiled at her son, amazed by how strong he had become over the course of eleven years.

"We are shape-shifters. Blessed by the gods to be one with an animal spirit. We are the children of the Mighty Bear. We protect the wilds from those wishing to bring it harm and in return the bear spirit protects us."

Bael looked around. "Who would wish such a place harm?"

"Their are many who would destroy our home if they thought a measure of power could be gained from it. Orcs and man are the foremost of these beings. Other races have learned to live within nature without destroying the balance, the mythical elves for instance."

"So, orcs and men are evil," he asked raising the axe for another strike.

"Not all. Some, like the northlanders, have learned to live in harmony. Everyone is different, some good, and some evil. However, it is hard to tell the difference sometimes."

"So, how am I supposed to tell then?"

"Their actions will speak for themselves. Do not judge anyone until you have seen their true face. It may take some time but you will be able to sniff out those who mean you harm."

"And my father, he was a shape-shifter like us?"

"No," she replied. "He was a man, a strong man name Baldur. He was a slave in a human city to the north called Kol. I watched him fight and his strength was great. You look a lot like him."

He gave her a puzzled look and she laughed.

"A little too much like him . . . you see we cannot breed with others of our kind. It takes a human for us to mate. We were once human after all."

"So, what happens if two shape-shifters were to breed," he asked splitting another log.

"It cannot be so. It just simply doesn't work. I do not know why this is so. It is just as it is."

"I see."

He did and for that she was very proud. He is everything I ever wanted him to be and so much more . . .

"Mother, I have another question. What is a slave?"

She frowned at the question.

"A slave is . . .," she started fumbling for the words, ". . . a slave is someone who is not free to do as they please. Someone who is owned by someone else."

Bael stopped; a look of shock upon his face.

"Owned? Like I own this axe," he asked.

"Yes. Some look to own others as you own that axe. They see others as a tool to be used for their gain. It is very sad."

"Why don't these slaves strike back at their owners. Why don' t they snap their necks and free themselves?"

"Not everyone can do such, as you can. Not everyone is strong like us. And there are some who find it a better lifestyle than they once had," she said with sadness in her voice.

"Bah! Then they are weak and deserve their fate!" He exclaimed splitting a log and driving the axe deep into the stump below.

With a snarl and movement quicker than Bael

thought possible his mother charged, knocking him into the dirt and pounced upon him pinning him to the ground. She looked him face to face, her features very feral and she growled, "No one ever deserves such a fate! Do you understand? No one!"

Bael had never seen his mother so angry. He didn't know what to say. He started to speak when she slackened her grip allowing him to breath once again. She cocked her head as though listening. "Mother . . . I . . .," he began.

"Shhhh!" She began to sniff the air. "We are not alone."

Bael looked around again and saw now sign of any other being in the area. He began to say as much when a bolt flew from the underbrush barely missing his mother. From where the arrow came a being appeared, a human with a large scar across his face encased in a strangely engraved breastplate with a crossbow in his hands. The eye the scar crossed had long been lost, now covered by a glowing crystal patch. His hair was streaked with gray lines and he bore a large mustache. His crystal blue eye looked at the woman and her cub and he smiled.

"It seems I've found you at last, freak. You have given me a long hunt and for that I thank you. It has been awhile."

"Drath, you fiend! How did you find me?"

"I wouldn't be known as one of the world's greatest hunters if I didn't have a few tricks up my sleeve."

Jathira growled and his smug grin widened.

"I had no trouble finding you and your sister the first time, now did I?"

Jathira moved and Drath fired. The crossbow bolt struck true impaling her right shoulder. She didn't seem to feel the pain as she rushed forward. More bolts struck from the underbrush as three other men appeared from nowhere. Jathira stumbled from the bolts and crashed to the ground at Drath's feet. She started to rise only to find a boot to her face knocking her back into the dirt.

"Ah, I see the poison is taking effect. Do yourself a favor and stay down. It would be a pity to put you down like your sister."

Bael started to his feet feeling his hand grasp the axe. He rose to help his mother. Drath, seeing the young boy, trained his crossbow on him. Jathira looked defiantly upward.

"Now what do we have here? A cub. Now I see why you came to these forsaken woods. Now come quietly or I may just take him."

"You can try. I'll cut you down where you stand," Bael stated.

The three men laughed.

Jathira looked back at her son holding his axe at the ready. She knew that Drath would shoot him down before he got in a blow. She had to think fast. She could see the anger building inside her son.

Her last view was of her son rising to his feet as the other human lifting his crossbow to fire.

With a snarl she changed shape, into her other self. She grew twice her size, ripping out of her armor. She rose defiantly.

"Run!" she screamed blocking Drath's shot. He fired on instinct, the bolt piercing her chest followed by three more from his companions. Bael too acted on instinct. He rushed the nearest man and cut him down before he could reload. A bolt grazed his arm as he charged the second man and severed his head in one swing but not before the third man's bolts struck him in the upper leg causing it to buckle. Bael fell to one knee.

Looking to his mother he saw that she still stood but blood trickled from various wounds. Drath had dropped his crossbow and was slashing at her with a silver longsword. Jathira reached for the man, pulling him into her powerful arms and began to squeeze the life from him. Drath struggled to break the hold.

"Run," Jathira screamed again. The third man reloaded his crossbow.

Somehow Drath broke the hold, pulling a silver dagger from his belt and stabbed Jathira through the eye. She screamed and dropped the man, clutching the wound. Her howls echoed throughout the forest and she stumbled backward and fell into the dirt with a final whimper. Her last view was of her son rising to his feet as the other human lifting his crossbow to fire.

"Hold," Drath called out. The man held his shot. Bael stumbled to his feet, pulling the bolt from his leg with a cry of pain. Drath stepped in front of him, crossbow at the ready. "You have spirit, young cub. However, you are not worthy of my hunt as of yet. Perhaps someday . . ."

Bael glared at the monster.

". . . but not today."

The last thing Bael remembered was Drath's boot lashing out and then there was darkness.

V

It was well into the night before Bael awoke. It took him a few moments to come to his senses. *What happened. . .* he thought, trying to remember. Then, it all came back to him in one violent rush. He quickly looked around for his mother, his keen eyes seeing better by the moonlight than most men. He quickly made out the crumpled shape of his mother laying on her back in the dirt. He dragged himself to one leg and whimpered as he tried to stand on the other. The wound still throbbed, but he fought back the pain. He limped his way over to his fallen mother hoping there was something he could do. Tears welled in his eyes, as he drew nearer. He fell to his knees next to her body and lifted her from the dirt. To his horror he realized that where her head once was, nothing, but a bloody stump, remained. He sobbed and let out such a howl of anguish that every creature in the nearby forest paused at the sound. His mother was dead. *Killed for what? A hunt?* There was so much he didn't know. He frantically searched about looking for his mother's head but found only blood stained dirt. *He took it*, he thought. *He took it as a trophy!* Anger unlike anything Bael had ever known welled up inside him. He struggled to his feet, no longer feeling the pain of the wound and began to think. What would his mother do? She would track down the fiend and rip out his throat. He looked down at the body and began to sob. So caught up in his grief he failed to notice the large approaching shadow.

It was on him before he was aware. His first clue to the beast's appearance was its hot breath on his neck. He froze. The beast sniffed him for several moments before moving around the boy. In the darkness the large bear was hard to see even for Bael's vision. The one feature that could be made out clearly was its eyes. It looked into his as though looking into his soul. This sent a shiver of fear and excitement down his spine. Bael had seen his mother approach the bears of the Tyrant Forest more than once, but even she never dared to get this close. Her words came back to him. "One day you will understand the kinship we share with our woodland brothers. It is a feeling unlike any other. The key to this understanding is respect. Remember that."

The bear sniffed at Jathira's body for a moment and then began to nuzzle her arm as though trying to wake her. Bael dared not move, instead he stared into the beast's eyes. *The Bear Spirit protects its children*, he thought remembering more of his mother's words. The bear then looked upon the young man and began to nuzzle his arm then motioning its head towards the forest. In one quick motion the bear bound towards the tree line and stopped, looking back towards Bael.

It wants me to follow! he realized. The bear waited. Bael looked down at his mother's body and gently set it back to the earth imagining her smiling face looking upon him in approval. That image gave him an idea. He clenched his fist and concentrated, watching his hand grow, large patches of hair formed, and his nails elongated. Remembering his mother's face he placed his newly formed hand on his upper left temple, feeling his claws pierce his flesh. With one deep stroke he clawed downward towards his right cheek, scaring himself as his mother once did. Blood filled his eyes as he rose from the dirt; his hand returning to normal as he found the hilt of the axe with his other hand. Casting one last look down at his mother's body, Bael walked toward the waiting bear.

VI

"I still don't understand why you left the boy alive. He killed two of us."

"I wouldn't be a good hunter if I didn't throw a few back now and again, would I," Drath responded.

"Bah . . . I still say the boy is dangerous. What if he decides to come back and attack us while we sleep. I say we should have gone further than a few miles."

It had been the same argument since the hunt ended. Jaster wanted to kill the young one for slaying his companions. Drath didn't see the sport in it.

"He won't be back. He's not that stupid. He will go someplace to lick his wounds and by the time he is ready to fight we will be long gone. I got what I came for and he wasn't worth my time," he said, moving the bloody bundle containing his trophy closer to his bedroll. The ointment he applied to it would ensure that it stayed fresh long enough for him to have it properly mounted.

"Maybe we should take watches. I've never liked these woods. They say elves roam the area and don't take kindly to trespassers."

Drath looked to Jaster with a cold stare. "Old wives' tales. Besides, who's in charge here? I've spent most of my life as a hunter. I'm not afraid of a few bony-armed pixie-men that can't hold on to their own forest. Besides, they have their hands full fighting Darcadian soldiers. You have nothing to worry about, now go to sleep!" With that, he rolled over and pulled the covers up drawing the bundle closer to him. He smiled, *it was a good hunt*, he thought. *A good hunt indeed.*

The fire had nearly died out, its light slowly fading. Jaster stirred for what reason he never knew. His eyes fluttered open only to see the glint of firelight on the blade of the axe just before it sliced his head clean from his body. He never made a sound. Bael lifted the bloody axe and looked towards his next target. Drath still lay asleep clutching his bundle tightly. Bael limped closer as the pain in his leg subsided as vengeance became his only goal. Just a few more steps, he thought. However, he never made it that far.

It all happened so fast. One step later and he found himself staring at a sliver crossbow bolt. Drath had move quicker than Bael suspected the old man was capable of. The hunter smiled.

"I guess Jaster was right, we should have killed you. I didn't expect you to be this stupid boy. I thought your mother taught you better than that. I gave you a chance to live and this is how you repay me," he sighed. "I guess your head will look good on my wall next to your mother's." In his arrogance he never saw the looming shadow behind him.

Just as Drath began to pull the trigger on his crossbow the bear struck. Its large claws raked into the hunter's back and he cried out in pain. He fired the bolt on reflex, but it went wide vanishing into the forest. The mighty bear lifted the man from the ground, bedroll and all. Drath screamed as the beast's teeth took a large chunk of flesh from his left arm rendering it useless. Drath began to kick frantically trying desperately to break the death grip. The bear tighten its hold. Drath's head began to swim as he found it nearly impossible to breath. He lashed out feebly at the beast to no avail. He felt a few ribs snap under the beast's hold and in that second he knew this would be his final hunt. Then suddenly, he found himself on the ground, the beast looking down upon him. With his last reserves of strength Drath crawled for his longsword, but as his hand closed around the hilt, a foot stepped down upon the blade and pinned it to the ground. He looked up to find the young cub standing over him, axe raised high. The boy spoke.

"The Bear Spirit protects his children."

The axe struck.

Wide Open Places

By Gene Tutko Jr.

It has been nine days since Tennison has left his lean-to along the wharf.

He scrabbles down a darkening alley buried in the sprawl of the metal workers district until he can stand it no more. His breath catches violently in his throat, strangling, and he crouches low, head between his knees, dry heaving in long silent coughs. Forcing himself upright, he staggers out into Copper Square and leans against the wall of a ruined shop, thin fingers nervously scratching at his neck until red angry lines grip his throat. Just a little farther, he chides himself. Just a little farther.

The noise of merchants and people washes over him, accosting his skin until it itches and his eyes water. He sits on the ground again, shuddering, burying his face into shaking hands, his legs repeatedly pushing him weakly into the wall behind him as he begs to burrow under it. Sobbing into his hands, the sudden quiet of the square forces Tennison to peek around trembling fingers.

The people of the square just watch the burning man's jolting dance. They watch his mouth open wide in a silent scream as sharp blue flames lick his skin and strip the hair from his skull. Mothers clutch the heads of children as the burning man spins and shudders disjointedly while waving arms trailing strips of burning cloth until he collapses into a heap of cackling flesh. The men mutter, meekly shaking their heads in agreement as angry shouts of action and screaming children weakly disturb the silence until they all begin filtering into the merchant stalls that line the square, retreating. The din of trade rises and blankets them. A few people mill around watching what the guard will do.

Tennison winces as the guard pokes the man's remains with long pikes until the Black Robes arrive. Feeling exposed, he covers his nose with the back of his hand and flees down a side street. He stumbles for some time towards the Armory through twisting byways, flinching at the sound of gears and steam punctuating the growing darkness. Just a little farther, his silent mantra comes again. Just a little farther.

Along a soot blackened wall, Tennison fingers a lose brick and disappears. Waiting until the hinged section snaps shut, he scuttles down a torch lit tunnel, pressing his hands against his head to dull the Armory's continuous derisive clamor. He stumbles through a stone archway, landing on his knees on the hard rock floor as if in prayer.

Rill and Lisfol are arguing again, but he doesn't mind. The noise of the foundry has stopped and there are only ten others present.

"The counsel had not agreed," Rill said, slamming his hand down onto a small rectangular table in the room's center.

"No matter. E's dead now," said Lisfol. "Whether an informer or no, one less to worry over."

"We have no cause for killing," Rill begins until cut off.

"No cause," Lisfol said laughing. "They take the library and caste us out, blamin us for little rain and poor crops. And when the sickness hits, the crown watches'em hunt us til we scatter like rats," he continues pacing along the room, challenging each of them. "Have you no courage," he taunts.

"Was a brick layer," Tennison says quietly to himself. "A wife. Four kids."

Lisfol yanks Tennison to his feet and shakes him twice before pinning him to the wall with strong hands, savoring the squeal of fear that Tennison tries to swallow. Unconsciously, Tennison begins a warding cantrip until Lisfol slams a fist into his face, crumpling him to the ground. Lisfol turns to the others, but his piercing words about Black Robes and duty die on his lips. Tennison hears it as he struggles to stand and retain consciousness. To him it sounds loud, penetrating his need for quiet.

The whisperings of a faint melody sharpens and Lisfol howls in anger as Rill's spell forcefully hurls him across the room. Scanning every face for support, Lisfol stands slowly and turns to face Rill as he slowly brushes away the dirt. Without the others, it was an even split and they all knew it. Tennison hardly counted.

"Time's up," Lisfol said pulling an odd contraption from his cloak and tapping its bronze case. "Let me know when the useful are done hiding," he finishes, walking past Tennison and spitting into the dirt near him before leaving with a flurry of his leather coat.

The other men and women form knots of heated words as Rill helps Tennison to his feet. "Let's go. I'll take you back," Rill says absently. "Lisfol is

right. The Mage counsel is too scared to stand. And too fragmented to matter."

They take the south fork and Tennison winces, nearly faltering as he passes beneath Joran's silencing ward and the Armory's screeching barrage begins anew. Rill drags him forward, pulling him along the tunnel's slow upward grade, his hands firm against Tennison's elbow. The tunnel empties into a small alley filled with barrels of scrap metal, and they both have to crawl until reaching the gate concealed by clinging weeds and vine. Rill sings the simple opening spell, as Tennison has barely the strength to withstand the thought of traversing more streets choked with people. Nearly tumbling out as Rill pushes him forward, Tennison whimpers at the wide black demon of a night sky that hangs over his head.

"Easy now," Rill says. "Jus a short walk to the docks, eh Tenn."

Slipping through the Armory's cluttered back alleys, Rill leads Tennison toward the wharf. Life seems to seep back into the streets as they get further from the constantly churning factories, fighting against the soot and burrowing into the gray lifeless buildings that bracket steam furnaces and dim workhouses until the south side's main street comes into view. Rill sighs in relief at the sight of late night milling crowds boiling around fire spitters and street performers. Nudging Tennison, he smiles and eases his pace while keeping hold of his friend. Tennison frowns and bends his head down to count cobblestones, trying to distract himself from the pressure of bodies and the queasiness that rises from his stomach. Just a little farther, he murmurs. Just a little farther.

As they cross the main street heading for a cobbled bridge, two drunks careen into them, carrying Tennison partly down the street until he slips and falls to his knees. Tennison tries to stand but the drunks hold him down, kneeling on his back as a sound like thunder shakes the long poles upon which the street's torches sit and scatters people into screaming clumps. Tennison looks up, no longer fighting to rise; shielding his eyes with a single hand as a woman bursts into flames.

One of the drunks leans over him and grabs Tennison's head, twisting it sharply. "Eh little man. He wants ya ta watch," the drunk says in a wet nauseating voice as more people are engulfed by fire.

Tennison cries out as he looks for Rill and finds him hovering ten feet above the street, his arms held tight against his body, his mouth moving spastically without sound. Guards yell and rush towards Rill with spears, thrusting them into his body until his blood washes them clean. Tennison collapses and the drunken men's laughter gnaws at his ears while the smell of burning flesh suffocates him. An aura of magic drags him to look up again, giving him purpose. Lisfol, huddled into the corner of a building, stands blank eyed and muttering, his fingers weaving intricate lines under the cover of his cloak.

Enjoying the show, the drunks totter under the force of Tennison's cantrip, falling heavily to the ground with deep groans. Rising to his knees, Tennison's simple spell catches Lisfol distracted, illuminating him in a filigree web of glowing light. Missing the people that suddenly point at him and shout, Lisfol looks at Tennison and smirks. He doesn't realize his error until partway into the fire spell meant for Tennison. The crowd, headless as some explode into flames, bears Lisfol down and tears him apart.

As people throw Lisfol's remains into the canal, Tennison stumbles away, swaying as he counts cobblestones toward the docks. Just a little farther, he thinks. Just a little farther.

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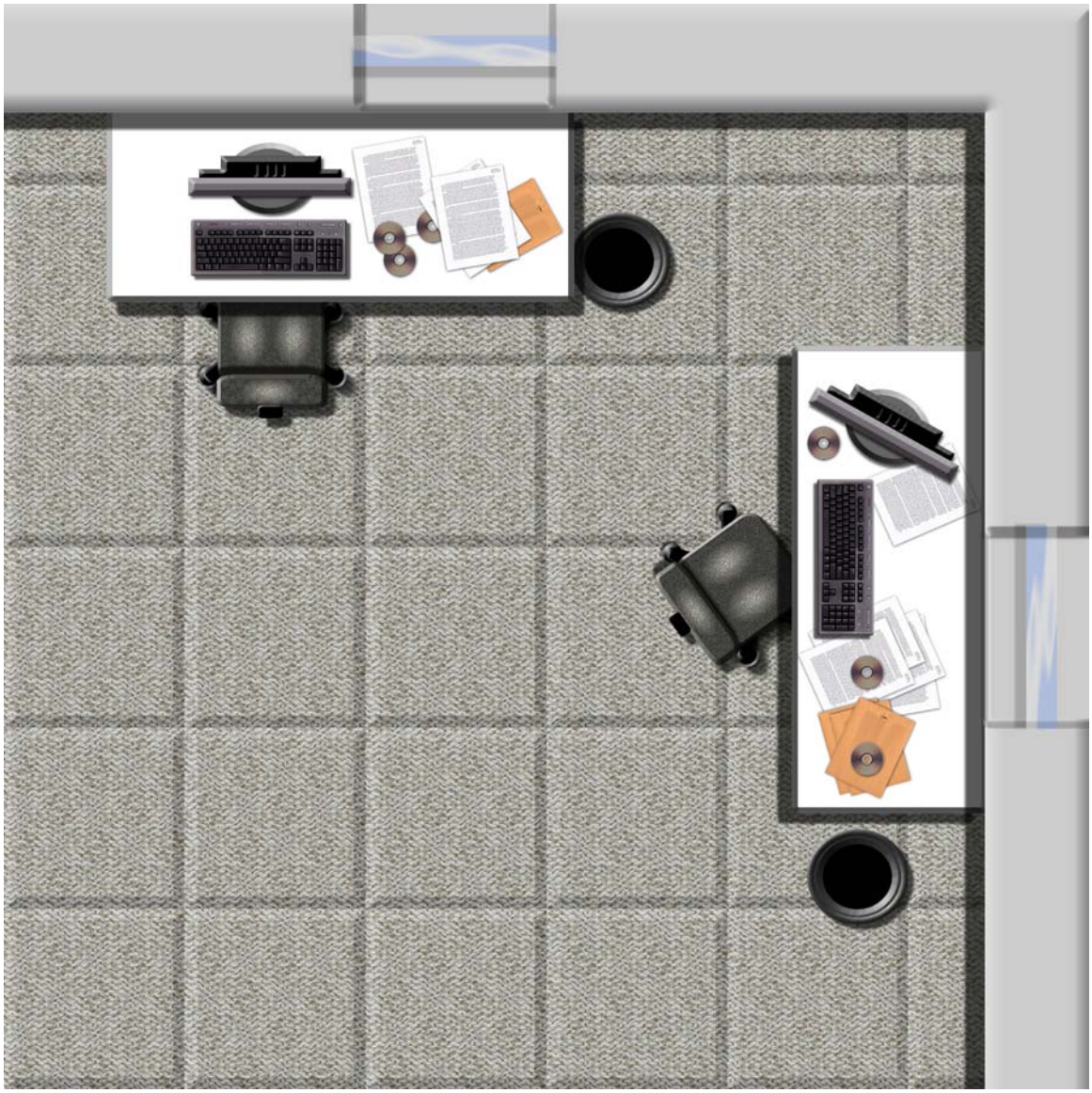

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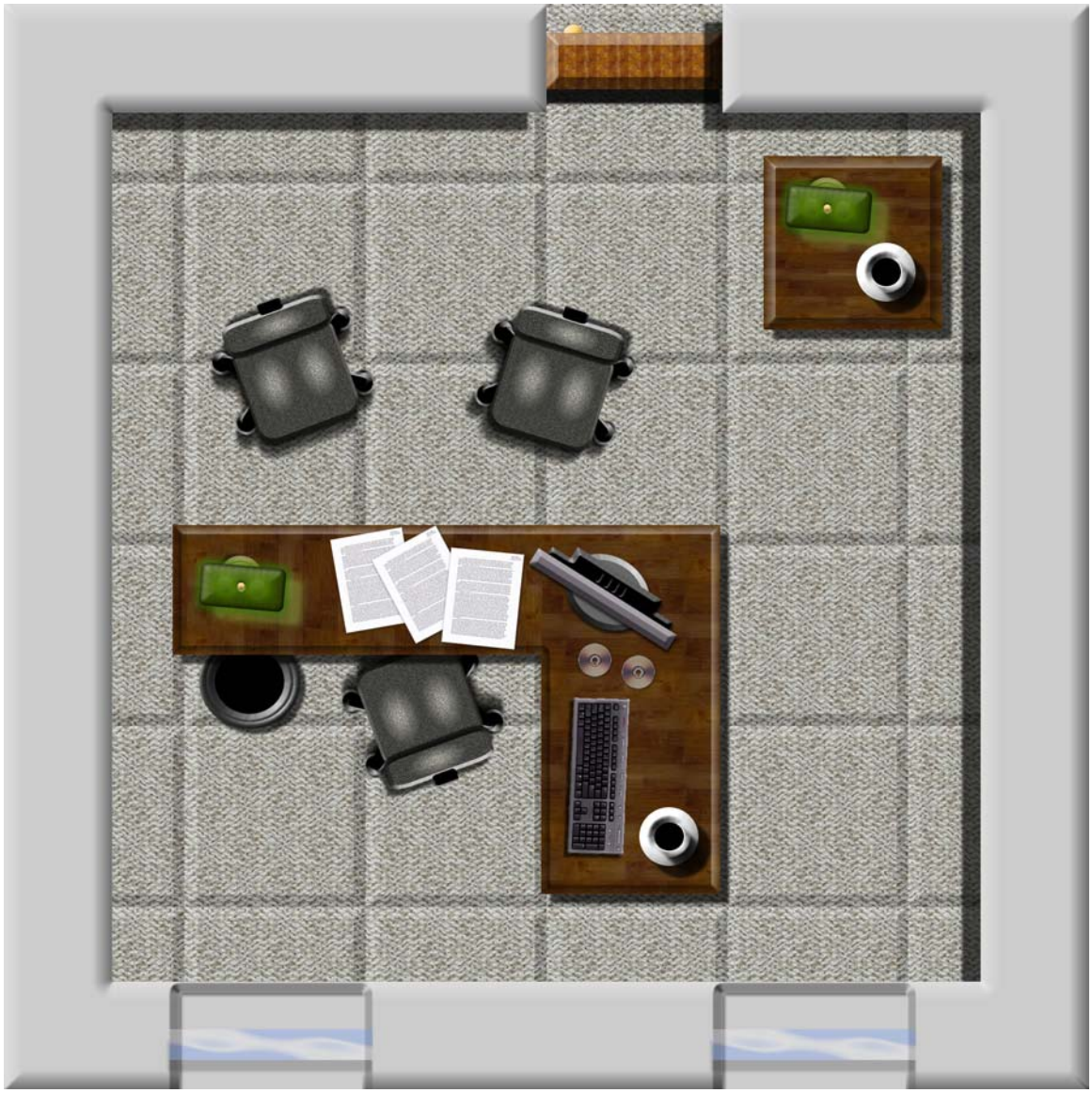

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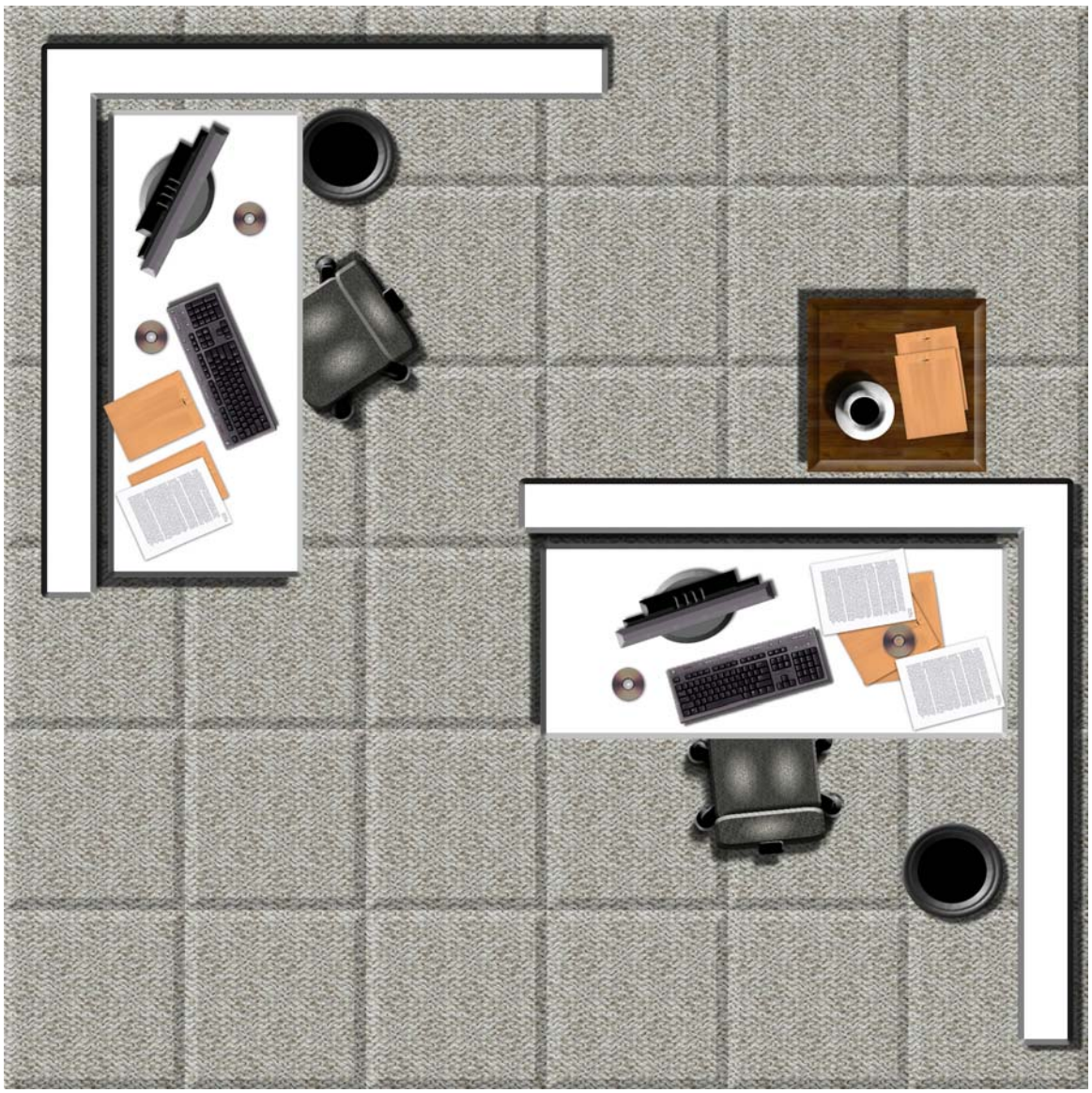

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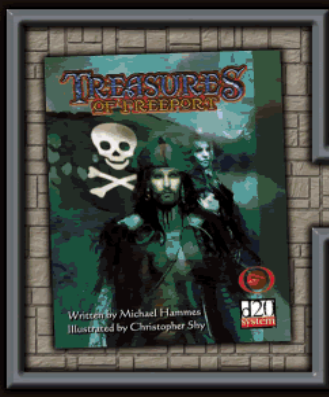

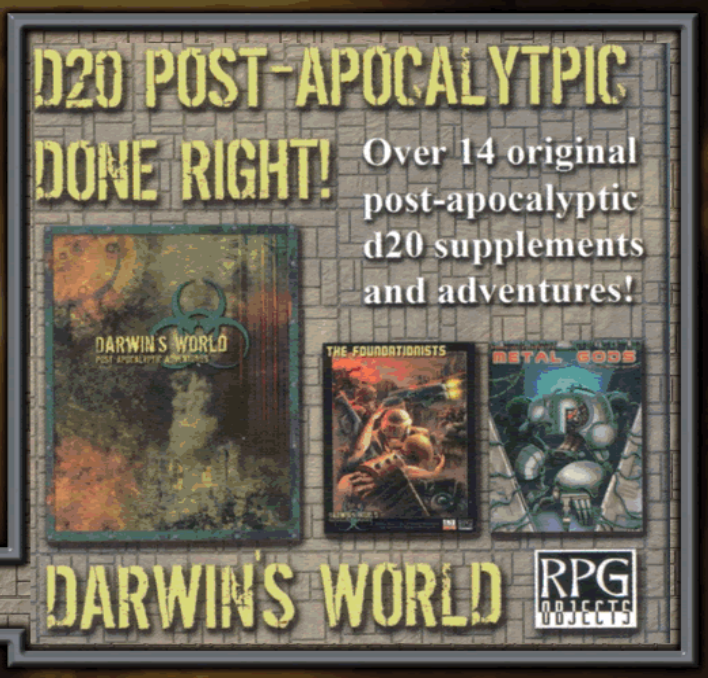

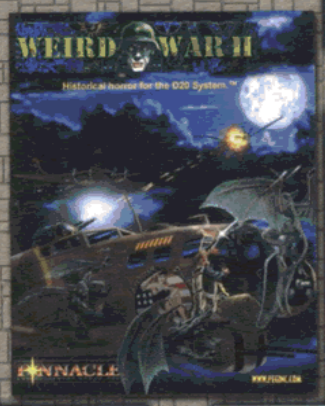

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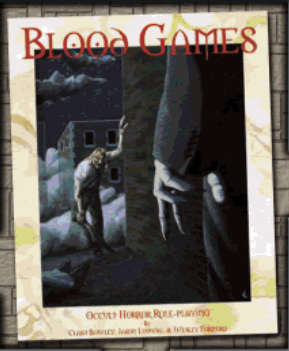

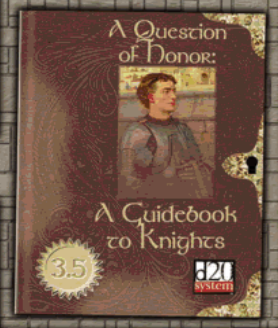

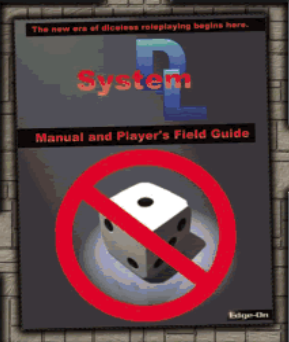

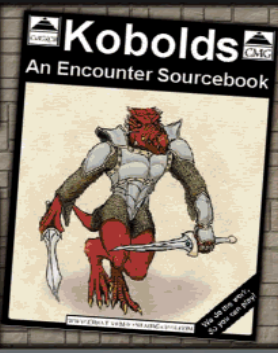

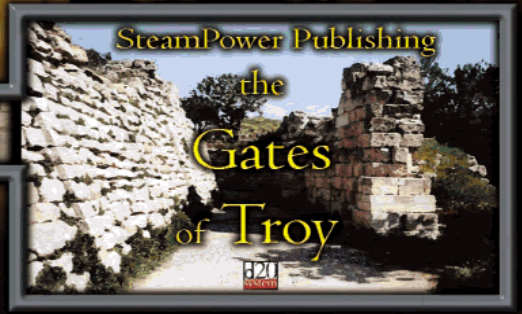

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